



The Atlantic Report **FRANCE**

CPYRGHT

THE Ben Barka scandal, coming on the heels of De Gaulle's lackluster victory in last December's presidential elections, has further accelerated the slow waning of the Gaullist star. Until it broke, the Gaullist regime had been able to commend itself to public opinion at home and abroad as a model of order, efficiency, and virtue compared with the unstable and scandal-ridden governments of the Fourth Republic. The Ben Barka affair, which came to a head in January, brought to light not only the moral fallibility of several cloak-and-dagger operators but the modus operandi of an entire regime as well.

The exact manner in which the left-wing Moroccan leader Mehdi Ben Barka was lured to Paris on October 29, where he was abducted by Frenchmen working for the Moroccan secret police, is too complex to be described in a few words. But the important point as regards French involvement is that as early as May of last year the S.D.E.C.E. (Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre Espionnage) — a rough French equivalent of our CIA — was informed of a Moroccan project for repatriating Ben Barka, who had established his home in Cairo, if necessary by "unorthodox" methods. The S.D.E.C.E. agent who supplied this information, an Orly airport agent named Antoine Lopez, who had once served as Air France representative in Tangier, was ordered to keep track of the project and to keep his superiors informed, and he did.

In September the Moroccan Minister of the Interior, General Mohammed Oufkir, began to put pressure on the S.D.E.C.E. If, it was intimated, the S.D.E.C.E. failed to cooperate in helping get Ben Barka back to Morocco, then the S.D.E.C.E. must face the prospect of having its elaborate network in Morocco, the base for all its operations in Africa, curtailed, if not completely dismantled.

The threat may not have impressed the high command of the S.D.E.C.E., which in early October ordered a suspension of further involvement in the affair, but it impressed Lopez's immediate superior, Major Marcel Leroy (alias Finville),

sufficiently for him to exceed his instructions and order Lopez to continue "following" the affair. Lopez in turn exceeded his instructions by not only "following" the project but actually participating in the early stages of the abduction.

Conspiracy of silence

Both the Paris Prefect of Police and Roger Frey, the Minister of the Interior, had extensive information about the circumstances of Ben Barka's abduction, including Oufkir's participation in it, yet no effort was made to question him about it during his Paris visit four days after the kidnapping. And when, on November 3, General de Gaulle himself was apprised of what had happened, Frey was ordered to keep the matter quiet, inasmuch as the General had decided to announce the next day his intention of running for office again.

This official conspiracy of silence was maintained throughout the presidential campaign, Roger Frey even going so far as to claim, in the early stages of the inquiry, that the French police had no part in the affair, although in fact two members of the Paris police's narcotics squad were involved. It was only after the press, led by the weeklies *Minute* and *L'Express*, had broken the affair wide open in January with sensational revelations made to them by one of the participants (Georges Figon, who shortly afterward committed suicide) that the government displayed a belated zeal in having the truth brought to light.

No government is particularly anxious to raise the curtain on the murky cloak-and-dagger operations of the agents and double-agents it secretly employs. The French government is no exception. A civilian government, however, can take refuge behind the excuse that it has been hoodwinked by military or other professionals acting on their own hook; not so the government of General de Gaulle. The history of Gaullism over the past twenty-five years is, in fact, replete with episodes of the Ben Barka type, which were usually hushed up before the disclosures proved too damaging. One of the first things De Gaulle did after setting up his headquarters in London in 1940 was to establish

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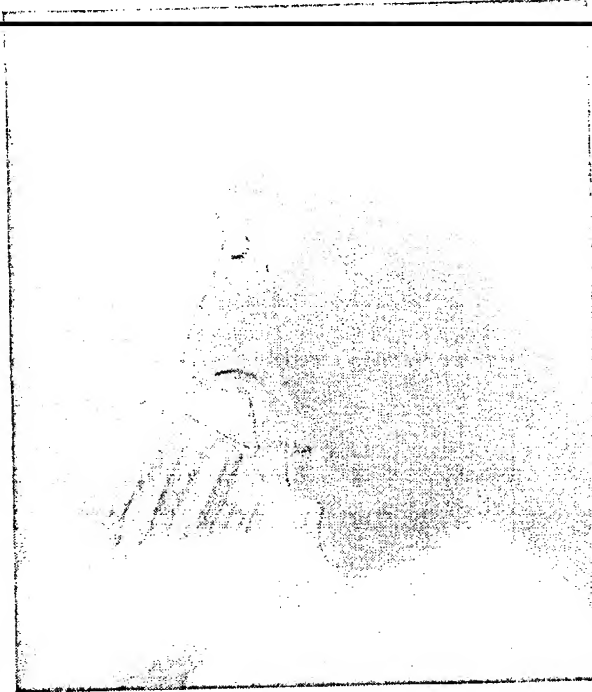
a secret service which came to be known as the B.C.R.A. (Bureau Central de Renseignements et d'Action), whose job it was to collect information and to organize resistance operations in occupied France. After the liberation, this became the D.S.T. (Défense et Sécurité du Territoire), the French equivalent of the FBI.

The subsequent transfer of the Gaullist headquarters to spy-infested Algiers encouraged the employment of *sub rosa* methods. Admiral Darlan's assassination early in 1943, though it was actually carried out by a royalist hothead, was suspected of having been engineered by B.C.R.A. agents, who lost no time liquidating the assassin before he could be brought to trial. Another strange affair occurred a year and a half later, in August of 1944, when an attempt was made on the life of De Gaulle's most dangerous rival, General Henri Giraud. The would-be assassin, in this case an Algerian Muslim, was executed after a summary trial, but not before a link of complicity had been traced back to De Gaulle's Ministry of War.

Cloak-and-dagger men

After De Gaulle's abrupt withdrawal from power in January of 1946, the B.C.R.A. went through a number of changes and was infiltrated by Socialists anxious to neutralize its Gaullist leadership. In the process it changed names several times, finally ending up as the S.D.E.C.E., whose primary job is to keep tabs on foreign intelligence systems operating abroad. To this day, though it has gone through a series of overhauls, a number of its agents are former Gaullist Resistance men.

One of them was Philippe Castille, who helped engineer the "bazooka plot" of January, 1957, which was intended to kill General Raoul Salan, then commander in chief of the French forces in Algeria. In the subsequent trial, which began in Algiers, both Castille and the chief defendant, René Kovaes, claimed that the plot had been aimed to replace Salan, thought to be too lethargic for the job of saving French Algeria, by the more dynamic General Cogny, then head of the French forces in Morocco; they also claimed that one



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**SPANISH
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of the principal instigators of the plot was Michel Debré, the leading Gaullist in the French senate.

After De Gaulle's return to power in May, 1958, Debré was appointed Minister of Justice. When the trial, transferred from Algiers to Paris, was reopened in August, Kovacs was suddenly seized by an attack of appendicitis and allowed to go to a hospital in Troyes, from which he subsequently disappeared. He turned up later in the Balearic Islands, where he has continued to live.

The observatory affair

François Mitterrand, who was Minister of Justice at the time the bazooka shell was fired into Salan's office, has since maintained that this affair was the prelude to the May, 1958, putsch which brought De Gaulle back to power. There is also little doubt that the strange "observatory affair" of October 16, 1959, in which Mitterrand was pursued around the Luxembourg Gardens in the middle of the night and had his car riddled with Tommy-gun bullets, was at least indirectly engineered by Gaullist agents bent on ridiculing a man who knew a bit too much about the behind-the-scenes truth of the "bazooka affair."

Curiously enough, the man who pulled off the Luxembourg Gardens car chase was a former Gaullist (later Poujadist) deputy named Robert Pesquet, who openly confessed the bogus assassination attempt a week after it had been perpetrated. Pesquet, after first being imprisoned, was later let out on parole, and subsequently disappeared abroad.

Last November, during the presidential election campaign, he wrote an open letter to the Paris daily *Le Monde*, in which he declared that the man who had masterminded the "observatory affair" was Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour, who had undertaken to defend him during the early stages of his trial. In effect, he charged that one presidential candidate (Tixier-Vignancour) had engineered a bogus assassination attempt against another presidential candidate (François Mitterrand). Just why Pesquet should have chosen this particular moment to make this

damaging claim against his former lawyer is not clear.

Since 1959 not a year has passed without some startling cloak-and-dagger affair of this kind, carried out either by the more or less "official" secret services working for the Premier, the ministers of the interior and defense, or by the more hush-hush networks, of which there are at least four, that operate under the direct orders of Jacques Foccart, De Gaulle's personal secret police chief.

In September of 1961, at a time when there was growing restlessness in France over De Gaulle's inability to end the Algerian war, the French were startled by an attempt on De Gaulle's life made just outside the village of Pont-sur-Seine. The attempt — involving 350 yards of detonating wire, several jerricans supposedly full of dynamite, which leapt into flame but did not explode as the President's car passed, and an impecunious character with one foot in the underworld who obligingly gave himself up to the police within the next couple of hours — was given full prominence by Roger Frey, who appeared on television to describe the "plot" in all its lurid detail.

By a curious coincidence, three French generals were arrested the very same day, one of them General Paul Vanuxem, who was kept in prison for two years before being brought to trial and subsequently acquitted. The man who turned out to have engineered the assassination attempt against De Gaulle, a certain "Captain" Mertz, managed to smuggle himself out to Canada so as not to have to appear as the chief defendant in the trial. Even so, the names of both Jacques Foccart and Alexandre Sanguinetti, one of Frey's right-hand men, were mentioned in connection with the "plot."

Involvement at the top

The salient difference between the Ben Barka affair and its many predecessors is that on this occasion one of De Gaulle's intelligence agencies was caught *flagrante delicto* involved in an operation which damaged De Gaulle's prestige with the African world and his hitherto cordial relations with King Hassan of Morocco. The General's bitterness over this realization was succinctly expressed at a January cabinet meeting at

which he remarked: "I am the head of the State, but the State no longer exists." He was admitting that he is today as much the prisoner as the master of the apparatus of power he has personally built up.

Under duress De Gaulle is likely to be even more mulish than normally. He proved it again last January when, at the beginning of his second seven-year term, Premier Georges Pompidou ceremoniously offered his resignation, which the General promptly refused. The new cabinet, which was sworn in on January 8, included not only the same Minister of the Interior, Roger Frey, but also a new Minister for Veterans, in the person of Alexandre Sanguinetti.

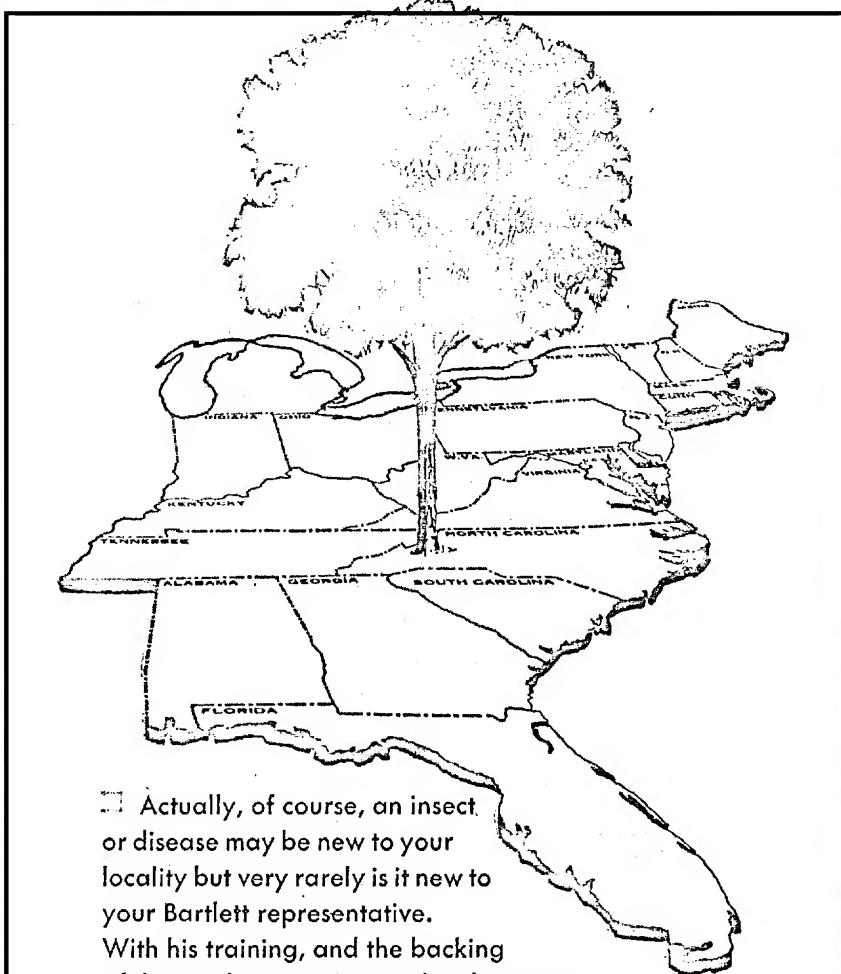
In other respects as well, the changes in ministerial faces signified a continuation of methods and policies of the past. The most startling change was the return to the government of Michel Debré, who replaced Valéry Giscard d'Estaing as Minister of Finance. Unlike his predecessor, who knew a great deal about economics, Debré is a lawyer lacking in any particular economic qualifications. He makes up for what he lacks in this field by two qualities — a fanatical loyalty to De Gaulle, and an enormous capacity for work. It was Debré who, after the first disastrous runoff, in which De Gaulle won only 44 percent of the vote, persuaded him that he had to roll up his sleeves and really get into the fight.

Economic upturn

The highly publicized economic program which Debré introduced in mid-February had in fact been prepared by his predecessor, Giscard d'Estaing, and it was ushered in at a time when the eighteen-month recession (which held France's annual growth rate down to a 2 percent last year) was just about ended. By quietly yielding on the issue of the Common Market's joint agricultural policy and by entrusting future negotiations on the subject to Edgar Faure, a political virtuoso of the first order, De Gaulle also opened the way for a gradual reconciliation with the farmers of France, who played an important part in his first-round setback of last December.

Whether the economic upturn which is expected will suffice to dis-

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sipate the cloud which has recently darkened the fortunes of Gaullism is another matter. In France, as elsewhere, memories are apt to be short, and by the time the parliamentary elections, which must be held before April of next year, roll around, the Ben Barka affair will have disappeared from the headlines. It will, however, offer De Gaulle's opponents a handy issue.

De Gaulle's opposition

In the meantime, the Gaullists have no reason to lament the manifest failure of the various opposition groups to coalesce into truly effective and unified parties. François Mitterrand's Federation of the Democratic and Socialist Left remains essentially limited to the Socialists, part of the Radical Socialist Party, and a small splinter party called the PSU, whose spiritual mentor is Pierre Mèndes-France. The Communists, who outnumber any of these parties, are holding out for a "one candidate per constituency" formula. If this were accepted, it would oblige the Federation to endorse a sizable number of Communist candidates, which it is not yet prepared to do. The Socialists are themselves profoundly divided by the open hostility between their secretary-general, Guy Mollet, who has the backing of the northern unions, and Gaston Defferre, the mayor of Marseilles, whose support comes from the south.

The Radical Socialist Party, well known for its opportunism, is likewise split down the middle. One wing, led by its secretary-general, René Billières, has momentarily cast its lot with Mitterrand's Federation. The other wing, led by Maurice Faure, has opted for Jean Lecanuet's Democratic Center, which also includes the Catholic Popular Republican Movement, and the so-called "Independents," whose last important leader was former Premier Antoine Pinay.

Finally, on the right, Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour's intention of founding a French "Conservative Party" modeled on the British ran aground almost as soon as it was launched last January when a fierce internecine war broke out between Tixier-Vignancour and a former



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parachutist and deputy named Jean-Marie Le Pen. Accused of giving the "party" a "fascist" image, Le Pen angrily walked out, taking half of Tixier's executive committee with him. The rupture may prove a blessing in disguise for Tixier-Vignancour, who, for all his impetuosity, has always been far more intelligent than Le Pen. But for the moment there is no denying that the effort to launch a "Conservative Party" in France has gotten nowhere.

Of the three men who have recently emerged as opposition leaders, Jean Lecanuet remains the one most hated and feared by the Gaullists. The postmortem analysis of last December's election results brought out, among other things, that whereas only 13 percent of French left-wing voters voted for De Gaulle on the first round and only 14 percent on the second, 25 percent of the middle-of-the-road voters voted for De Gaulle on the first round, and (Lecanuet having been eliminated) 67 percent voted for him on the second. This is another way of saying that Lecanuet took 42 percent of the middle-of-the-road votes away from the General.

For the Gaullists, who must retain the support of the center if they are to retain their slim majority in the National Assembly (some 245 out of 480 members), Lecanuet is now the man to beat. Dramatic proof of it was afforded on February 7, when Lecanuet undertook to make his first important postelectoral speech at the Mutualité Hall in Paris.

The hall was filled to overflowing, but the Lecanuet fans who turned out in strength to cheer their leader were outshouted much of the time by several strong contingents of right-wing extremists, led by l'Action Française. The uproar was so great that little of the speech was heard, and Lecanuet's professorial appeal for calm fell on deaf ears. If the turbulence of this meeting is in any sense a pointer, then Jean Lecanuet is likely to have some rough sledding in the months which lie ahead. In any case, the emergence of l'Action Française, openly antirepublican, is not exactly a healthy sign for the future of French democracy.